

Summer Workbook Project: A Purposeful Way to Exploit Student-Generated Exercises

By Daniela Villani

One day I entered a classroom just after a math period and saw a student-generated mathematical problem written on the blackboard. I asked the math teacher about it and learned that she occasionally challenged her students to create their own problems instead of giving them the usual ready-made tasks to solve. She found this a motivating activity for the high achievers.

This reminded me of Suzanne Swales' article "Student-Generated Exercises" in the January 1992 issue of the Forum, and made me think about how I could exploit the concept in my EFL classes. It was then that the Summer Workbook Project came to mind.

This project involved my second-year students, aged 12-13, preparing a summer workbook to be used by my first-year students, aged 11-12. The project was proposed to the pupils of both classes and was accepted with great enthusiasm.

The Goals of the Project

For the students preparing the workbook, the project required:

1. reviewing all the main points of the curriculum from the previous year;
2. producing a booklet in English for summer study for real students;
3. raising their awareness about their own learning process by examining and categorizing the different types of exercises;
4. increasing their sense of responsibility towards their younger school-mates; and
5. recycling previously-learnt material in a creative way.

For the students who would be using the workbook, the project goal was to arouse their interest in English by using a text created by other students which was aimed at them personally.

Procedure

Phase 1 : Group Work

As a preparatory activity the pupils, working in groups of four, were asked to examine the various kinds of written tasks and activities that could be found in their textbooks.

In order to help them categorize the different exercises, a worksheet was handed out to them (Appendix 1 below).

They were asked to:

- a. find an example of each type of activity in their books and note down the page number;
- b. rank the activities from the most interesting to most boring, on a scale of one to five.

Phase 2 : Class Discussion

- i. Each group reported its findings while the others checked and completed their worksheets.
- ii. The exercises were graded from the most to the least agreeable for the students. Here a discussion arose between those who would include a lot of "nasty" exercises in the workbook and those who wanted to make life easier for their younger schoolmates. Finally, it was agreed that only a few "nasty" exercises should be included. The best-liked exercises involved matching and reordering, while the least popular required structural transformation.

Phase 3 : Group Work

In this productive phase, students were divided into groups of four and each group created eight exercises for assigned units from the previous year's curriculum. Using the worksheet as a guideline, they worked hard and produced activities which were often original and creative (Appendix 2 below).

In this phase I acted as a supervisor and counselor monitoring their work, giving advice, and helping with vocabulary.

When the work was completed, I checked it for correctness and relevance, but tried to leave the activities much as they were, both in form and content.

Phase 4 : Class Discussion

At this point the task was to find a title for the booklet. This time the "wicked" students prevailed over the "goodies" and the title "How to Spoil Your Holidays" was chosen.

Phase 5 : Individual and Group Work

Typing the booklet was done in computer class with the help of the computer science teacher. Drawing and graphic layout were done with the help of the art teacher. Finally, the secretary gave us a hand duplicating the booklet. When it was given out to the first-year pupils at the end of the school year, it was greeted with enthusiasm.

Phase 6 : Individual Work

At the beginning of the school year I collect the exercises from the first-year students and give them to the authors (the second-year students) to check and grade, thus providing them with additional meaningful practice. Playing the teacher's role has always been gratifying for students, and I am exonerated from checking their summer work myself!

Conclusion

Student-generated exercises have proved to be a highly motivating activity. Even though they are metalinguistic, they provide a great amount of meaningful written practice aimed at accuracy and the internalizing of grammar rules. The project encouraged a great deal of talking, negotiating, and decision making, which involved most students (and a few teachers, too!) in a cross-curriculum task.

I have also used student-generated activities by having students create lessons for their schoolmates in the class next door. They generally have great fun in doing this and become more independent learners in the process.

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Appendix 1

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Summer Workbook Project

Preliminary activity: categorizing and evaluating exercises

1. Matching exercises

What can you match?

Words or phrases with pictures

Example: No. 6 p. 34

Score: _____ (give points from 1 to 5)

2. Completion or cloze exercises

What can you fill in?

Grammar elements in a sentence

Example: No. 4 p. 62

Score: _____

3. Reordering exercises

What can you reorder?

The letters of a word (anagrams)

Example: No. 3 p. 22

Score: _____

4. Transformation exercises

What can you transform?

An affirmative sentence into a negative one.

Example: No. 8 p. 95

Score: _____

5. Recognition exercises (underlining, boxing)

What can you recognize in a text?

Verbs in a particular tense

Example: No. 6 p. 103

Score:_____

6. Transferring information

From what to what can you transfer information?

From text to charts

Example: No. 10 p. 115

Score:_____

7. Answering questions

How can you answer questions?

Yes/No answers

Example: No. 5 p. 92

Score:_____

8. Vocabulary review exercises

How can you review vocabulary?

Spidergrams

Example: No. 2 p. 60

Score:_____

9. Free writing

What can you write?

Answers to letters

Example: No. 3 p. 72

Score:_____

Appendix 2

Appendix 2

Examples of self-generated exercises

A. Anagrams: reorder the letters to form a word you know.

1. lephoTene =

2. iBhtrady =

3. Ogenar =

4. llabtooF =

5. gninroM =

6. hciwdnaS =

7. noitatS =

B. Match each city with the corresponding country:

Naples	England
London	France
Paris	Brazil
Tokyo	Italy
Rio de Janeiro	Japan
Berlin	Germany
Vienna	Switzerland
Bern	Austria

Now write sentences like the one below:

1. Naples is in Italy.

C. Underline the articles with a green pen and the verbs with a red one.

Mrs. Jones is a teacher. She lives on South Street near the bank. She works in the Primary School on Churchfield Road. Her husband, Carl Jones, is a textile worker. He works near the school.

D. Why not write to us? We would like to get to know you!

Use these notes as a guide for your letter:

name and surname

address

physical description

pets?

description of your house

Here are our names and addresses:

Marco Pizzini	via Guicciardini 14
Pierantonio Grippa	via Adige 20
Stefania Acquaviva	via C. Battisti 14
Domenico Ferlauto	via Mazzini 53
Enrico Locati	via Pier Lombardo 5
Alessandra Martelli	via C. Balbo 2/2

Francesco Salandria
Elisa Citter

via Po 2/a
via Mezzano 28/a

E. Complete this dialogue between Mrs. Day and yourself.

You: Good_____Mrs. Day.

Mrs. Day: _____.

You: How_____?

Mrs. Day Fine_____.

You: What's_____?

Mrs. Day It's_____.

You: Oh,_____late_____!!!

E. Which words can you link with the circled word in the spidergram?

G. Colour the picture according to the instructions. Some parts are labelled.

Colour them as you like.

A. brown

G. white

B. black

H. white

C. black

I. pink

D. pink

L. red

E. brown

M. brown

F. blue

N. yellow